Shi'ite Suicide Bomber

Barak met with Blair in Britain and the two discuss the combined British-American effort to compel Arafat to agree to the compromise plan that would lead to permanent arrangements and peace. Blair promises full cooperation. The British media is traditionally hostile toward Israel, but Blair promises to be at the disposal of Barak's plan, which he buys word for word.

Two years earlier, when he was head of the opposition, Barak sits in Tony Blair's garden at 10 Downing Street. "Under the portraits of all the British Empire's greats. This is where Winston Churchill ran World War II, when he wasn't in the bunker, of course."

The two go out into the garden and talk.

"We spoke about the necessity of a reform in the party without which we can't reach the public, and he told me how he found a party that hadn't been in power for 16 years, just like in our case, and about how he organized it and the campaign. I sat and took notes, and then took his people for my campaign. Through Blair I got to the Americans who were working with Clinton. He tried to centralize Britain. Center -wrapped-up in Labour. How did he do this? He told me that it was very simple: 'I went from place to place and explained to people the importance of a flexible labor market' (code for a situation in which you can fire people when the demand for products decreases). I told him: listen Tony, if we translate flexible labor market to Hebrew, no one will understand what I'm talking about." Today, when he's Prime Minister on an official visit, he mainly discusses the political process with Blair.

When he left 10 Downing Street, the group of journalists accompanying him on his way to the United States is waiting for him, but none of them seem particularly concerned about the outcome of the talks with Blair. "What about the hungry poor?" they ask him. "Data from the Israel Democracy Institute is being released and they're talking about 135 thousand citizens suffering from undernutrition." "When I get back I'll deal with this once and for all," he says stiffly, his mind focused on routing the European process. But in Israel emotions about the extent of poverty were running high, so much so that there were those who recommended he return home immediately to lower the flames.

"No way," he said to them, "what can I do? Stand in the street and hand out loaves of bread?"

In the State of Israel, where helping the other has become an industry of 'benefit societies' (*gmach*) and *schnorr* and the basis for political power, this statement is charged and brutal. Citizens perceive their prime minister as a merciful father, elected in order to guarantee support on a rainy day. Other than the professionally unemployed, *yeshiva* students and leeches, every reasonable person understands that they have to take care of themselves. But it is convenient to live under the illusion that the prime minister you voted for is there to help you at a time of need. A bunch of white lies about the leader's vague responsibility for his people has never hurt a public figure, but Barak isn't into illusions. He simply speaks in

stereo from his gut and head, and the seeds of calamity of the man who sells blood, sweat and tears are secretly sown in the hearts of Israeli citizens. Barak thinks he had rid himself of the matter and that he's free to lead the political process, but the story of the gaps and poverty haunt him all the way to his 44th floor suite at Park Lane Hotel, Manhattan, the home-base of his American trip.

Here he is more specific in his outlook: "The government must first and foremost treat with respect all the citizens that get up in the morning, work hard and pay taxes," he says, "these need to be encouraged and their numbers increased."

Back in Israel he is accused of supporting the top decile and he retorts with economic logic that there's no connection between him and the collective demand for an illusion of security: "The way to fight the gaps is not to lower the rich, but to pull the poor up."

He is aware of the political damage of the labelling of his government with poverty, and when the journalists left Barak called Israel and checked who will be taking the blame. When he learned that the swarm of anger is turned first and foremost against the heads of the local authorities he said, "We'll wait a day or two." Eli Yishay was silent. Barak spoke on the phone with Adi Eldar, Chairman of the Federation of Local Authorities in Israel. The next day all the heads of local authorities and municipalities responded strongly, claiming that the report is false. "No one in our locality suffers from hunger. It's all slander and libel and anyone who's hungry should stand up."

No one stood up. No one heard, saw or photographed authentic hunger.

* * *

Backstage to the media punches about the gaps and poverty, the battle over budget allocations was taking place. He's told: open up the budget, in any case you'll be getting big money from America; very soon the 800 million dollars Clinton promised after Wye River Summit will come in. Barak says: "I'm not adding an *agora* [a cent] until I see the money with my own two eyes."

Barak's person versus Eli Yishay is Adi Edlar, Chairman of the Federation of Local Authorities in Israel. Eldar went to the media and claimed that Yishay spent 97 million of the welfare budget for political and religious purposes, that is - for strengthening his position in *Shas* at Aryeh Deri's expense. Yishay, Eldar adds, cut the budget of a program for children at risk in favor of the ghost nonprofit organization *Matan* (Hebrew acronym for Torah project for youth) whose president is Rabbi Ovadia Yosef and its director is Shlomo Jacobson, brother of the secretary of the *Shas* Knesset faction, Zvi Jacobson. "There are children who benefit from double support at the expense of other children. Not to mention the salaried personnel," says Eldar.

Yishay is also the minister responsible for the National Security Institute. Lying in its vaults are billions intended to calm waves of fury such as those rising now. Even if Yishay is convenient bait to draw fire to, he mustn't be killed for good. Barak still needs Yishay to push the political process forward and he has to maintain

him on the leadership level in order to block Deri. After all, he pulls his weight: "It is possible that the Minister of Labor Eli Yishay will have to change allocation priorities of his ministry's budget. Less to ultra-orthodox entities and more to social help. Barak knows that *Shas* money is also for social help, but it is distinctly for those close to the plate, for ongoing maintenance of their flock of followers.

Israeli politics experts, such as Chaim Ramon, fell off their feet when they heard Barak's statement.

"This man is a Shi'ite suicide bomber," Ramon said.

כשהמשיכו ונשו this statement from Barak, he responded impatiently: "A government is not God that you look up at and it responds. God also doesn't respond to every prayer…I expect people to take care of themselves."

Wily politicians, sensitive to Barak's dependence on Yishay, say about Barak: this man is a goner. To stick it to Yishay, to Jacobson, to Rabbi Ovadia, and to bring God into the mix, is like shooting yourself in the foot, if not banging your head against the wall. After all, you are weakening Yishay, he's told, angering Ovadia and boosting Deri who is preparing himself (in the days before his trial) for a grand return, as religious and political leader.

Where is Deri? Barak has heard that he's moved to Safed, to live near the graves of the righteous in Peki'in and he's already been dubbed as the Baba from Peki'in or the kabbalist from Peki'in (in Hebrew, the initials MM). It is told that he immerses in the *mikveh* 310 times daily, as is the custom of the kabbalists, dons a big black yarmulke, reads prayers from a kabbalist *siddur* (book of prayer), fasts, lets his beard grow wild and blesses people. None of this would have been worrying were it not for his driver who goes every Thursday to bring him back to Jerusalem, stopping off at *Shas* activists on the way.

A demonstration of *Shas* people recently took place opposite Yishay's office, with people holding "Resign" signs and signs reading "In the name of the 43 institutions shut down and 6,420 students out on the streets". Barak is aware of the need to strengthen Yishay against Deri, but there are events and situations in which his inner level of justice reaches a boiling point. He is warned that the budget proposal won't pass, and he says "justice must be done".

Zvulun Orlev, who is coordinating the religious-wide battle for allocations for state religious education, threatens that "if state religious education suffers, we will vote against the budget," but Barak is too connected to his real secular-liberal roots and backs Yossi Sarid who cut half of the religious education and cultural budgets.

That's it, they said in Ramon's surroundings, now it's clear that he doesn't stand a chance.

The forces are aligning toward voting for approval of the state budget, but in the background the ominous growl of the large wave of incitement against he who the *Mafdal*, *Shas* and the ultra-orthodox camp view as the great demon of the Jewish State is heard. As soon as things come to a religious war, and Barak is forced to speak his mind, he doesn't stand a chance.

First, he is an honest fellow, and second, he believes that religion belongs in synagogues and not in the Knesset. He doesn't use those actual words, but his

demeanor powerfully and conclusively communicates a western world view, tilting in the global-liberal direction. It was just a matter of time until a religious collision occurred, with Barak involved in a manner that can't be mistaken.

In a *Shas* rally in Beit Shemesh the local rabbi David Benizri, brother of the Minister of Health Shlomo Benizri, spoke. As usual in such gatherings, the local lay leader rounds his flock by letting loose against a common enemy. In Benizri's case it was the Russian immigrants who live in the city. Benizri described their way of living as "obscenity and impurity". From here the ball rolled into the national arena and to the government meeting. Shlomo Benizri stood up for his brother and said that "Herzl is turning in his grave. After all, he meant a Jewish State and not a state in which 50% were never Jewish. I call the Prime Minister to establish a committee that will examine the Law of Return so that only those who are actual Jews can make *Aliyah*."

Against his custom, Barak bangs on the table and raised his voice: "As long as I am Prime Minister this law will not be discussed or changed."

"If so," Benizri said, "can I publish a statement that the Prime Minister is all for importing as many gentiles as possible?"

Barak insists: "In my eyes they don't have a hold on the interpretation of the Jewish spirit, and this law has human logic in the spirit of the Jewish people dating back generations."

The Minister of Religion Yitzhak Cohen, who understood that this little scandal has to be milked to the bone in terms of the media, burst out against Barak: "Where is your limit? 70% gentiles? 80%?"

"You will shut up and not interrupt a Prime Minister when he's talking," Barak reprimanded.

"And you will not shout at me," Cohen answered.

Barak turns his eyes toward him, sending that icy beam of contempt that has frozen quite a few personal relationships in his near and far vicinity: "I won't stop anyone on their way to the door…" he said to Cohen dryly. Cohen didn't pick up on the hint. As far as Cohen is concerned, Barak's look, tone and text are something out of a science fiction movie. Barak closed the argument with a clear statement for the record: "I conclude that there is no obscenity in the Russian immigration as a generality, just as there is no obscenity in other immigrations."

After a while, when the brouhaha with Benizri is far behind him, he says: "I know they say that twenty, thirty and forty percent of the immigrants from the Soviet Union are not Jewish… what is considered not Jewish? Once their children have served in the army and they speak Hebrew, their sons are Jews for all intents and purposes. There is the matter of the registration at the Rabbinate, and that too needs to be taken care of. I remember when, as an MK, I went to the funeral of a soldier called Nikolai who was killed in Lebanon. It turned out that he couldn't be buried because of Halakhic problems. His mother is from the Caucus and his coffin needs to be flown out to Krasnodar in the Caucus. This was something awful. Afterwards we adopted the father, and when I was Prime Minister we flew him over from Krasnodar with Putin's help, to talk with him and we set him up with an apartment. Nikolai used to tell his friends in 'Givati' the conditions in which he and his father lived in the central

bus station. And I say: "But his son, if he were alive, and his grandson would be Jewish for all intents and purposes and you don't want to move backward…" and then Barak lights up with the impish spark of someone with a retentive memory and an archivist of trivia and he says offhand: "There are some who say that Raful is a Subotnik (Slavic families who came to Israel at the end of the last century), so what?" Barak asks, "and how many Jews going back generations can compare to Raful in terms of his contribution to Israel's security?"

* * *

When it seems that *Shas* is falling apart, and after several telephone conversations, Barak decides to meet with Sharon publicly and start a process that might ripen with the government's collapse as a result of an all-encompassing religious and ultra-orthodox rebellion. As far as he is concerned there is reason to explore whether Sharon would be willing to enter a national unity government, assuming that the negotiations might explode and then those from the ultra-orthodox and religious camp who are hungry for his blood will pounce on him.

They meet; each with his baggage. Sharon, haunted by Netanyahu and a group of those after his seat, knows that his only asset is the right-wing spearhead, including the *messianics* and all kinds of weirdos; he describes the possibility of cooperation in terms of stonewalling the negotiations with the Palestinians without pre-conditions. Sharon's pre-conditions will not pass *Meretz*. Barak explains to him that there is no problem to enter the government on his terms and to resign from it when it turns out that the decisions require as much. Sharon doesn't reject this and they decide to wait and see what the day will bring.

In the meantime Barak has no choice and he relies on *Shas*' financial balance of terror and tries to buy the party once again. He recruits British Prime Minister Tony Blair for an international fundraising campaign that will neutralize the potential of the coalition falling apart with Sarid. Rabbi Ovadia flies to London with Eli Yishay, they meet with Blair and Yishay explains to him that "*Shas* plays an important role in the peace process because of Rabbi Ovadia's Halakhic ruling according to which it is permitted to return land in order to prevent bloodshed".

From there they began moving through Europe to collect money, and Barak assesses that he (possibly) has, toward the negotiations with the Palestinians, a few months of calm on the *Shas* front. The same goes for the Yesha Council. Barak holds countless persuasion conversations with many of the settlement leaders, including Shlomo Filber, Uri Elitzur, Aharon Domb and others, and he identifies the process they are undergoing as the rearguard battle. In Rabin's time they objected the peace process and the Oslo Accords. In Netanyahu's time they were busy trying to stop the political process. With the continuation of Rabin's policy in Barak's time, they have come to terms with the reality and are thinking about toeing the line, as they chew off a bite in their favor on every clause.

In a discreet meeting of the Yesha Council it is decided to stop the propaganda campaign against the establishment of a Palestinian state. The Council's expert on

surveys, Yaakov Katz, presents surveys that prove that the public supports Barak's moves and that "most of the public is convinced that the establishment of a Palestinian state is an irrevocable fact", and worst of all as far as they're concerned: "there is a Jewish majority supporting evacuation of settlements in return for peace". The price they are demanding for industrial peace: quietly approving additional allocations for expanding the settlement. Barak says: "I'll do what I can in the framework of the coalition agreements and the constrictions of natural reproduction. Nothing more." He explains to them that the Americans are monitoring every cent and that the American message is loud and clear: American support is contingent on the fact that the struggle is for Israel and not for the territories. They each go to their plans. In the background, a shadow of a threat to use force on both sides.

In the meantime, Arafat is pressuring the leaders of the world. He believes Barak is delaying the agreements they reached in Sharm El Sheikh. Barak asks Arafat for a postponement in the implementation of the Wye withdrawals, until the completion of the framework agreements. He hears from Arafat that he can even postpone the five percent promised to him in Sharm El Sheikh, but he wants to hear loud and clear and see distinct acts of freezing settlements during negotiations. Barak repeats: "There will be no new settlements. There will be construction that has passed all the approvals in previous governments because we are a country governed by law." And in any case, it is important to him to maintain a quiet front with the settlers until he enters the big negotiations.

As he's waiting for Arafat's response Yossi Sarid, who perhaps knows something that Barak doesn't know, walks in and pressures him to withdraw from the three villages promised to Arafat in the framework of the third stage of the second phase (Abu Dis, Al-Ezariya and Ar-Ram).

"After all, Bibi has already committed to implementing this," he says to Barak, "do something."

Barak is prepared to do this.

"But I want to know what I get, and until now I have no idea," he says to Sarid.

"You get 50 thousand Palestinians under our rule who at once move under Arafat's rule, and you have rightfully earned the trust of the world as someone who implements agreements."

Barak says: "In any case I plan to go to the summit. I'll include it in the price I give there. It's a shame to waste it here and now because they will then immediately demand the next stage, and we still can't see the end."

Sarid is not alone. Clinton calls annoyed and asks what about the withdrawal from Abu Dis. "Madeleine Albright is on her way to the region," he says to Barak, "and it will be to the point if she will be able to come to Arafat with an understanding on this matter."

Barak reiterates and explains to Clinton that Abu Dis will be handed over in the framework of the summit discussions, where he in any case intends to hand over much more than that single percent, and the effect will therefore be much greater.

Clinton says to him: "You've convinced me, but the problem is Arafat."

Barak says to him, “Ill speak with Arafat.”

He calls Arafat and asks to postpone the implementation of the third stage of the second phase and the target date for the framework agreement by several months, including handing over the villages in the Jerusalem area to Palestinian control. Via the Ginosar channel he reports to Arafat that the framework agreements will include most of the territories (“over ninety percent”), so why make a fuss now?

Arafat grinds his teeth and agrees, and sends via the joint committee channel his package of demands toward negotiations. This is a seven-page draft and among the demands: disbanding of all the settlements since ’67, compensations for the water usage, immediate implementation of signs of independence such as a currency and bank, the right to declare all the Palestinian Authority’s territory as a free trade zone and Israel’s recognition of the right of return for refugees from ’48, even though the Palestinians are not demanding the implementation of this right.

With opening positions for negotiations clear to both sides, Barak summons to his office Oded Eran, Ami Ayalon, David Levy and Brigadier General Amos Gilad who heads the IDF’s assessment, and discusses with them the response to Arafat’s demands and the preparations for Albright’s visit. Ayalon and Gilad share the opinion that Arafat is preparing a crisis toward Albright’s visit. He wants to force the Americans to intervene and extract the third withdrawal from Barak before the talks on the framework agreements. Barak clarifies, “It won’t help him,” and explains to his team the way in which he perceives the negotiations and the response to Arafat:

We are talking about a “framework agreement” for a permanent settlement until February 2000, and we are now in November ’99, and we need to discuss four topics: security arrangements, permanent borders, refugees and Jerusalem. At this point Barak, measured and as always, cautious to the point of suspicion, agrees to “strengthening the Palestinian territorial contiguity in the West Bank at the expense of the access roads that currently serve small and dispersed settlements in the area”; he agrees to Palestinian economic independence and is willing to increase the number of those employed in Israel; he rejects the demand for compensation for water usage; regarding the right of return he is prepared for “Israel to moderate its position regarding unification of families who left in ’67.

Barak appoints Levy to meet with Abu Mazen and convey to him the spirit of things.

The next day Barak publicly says: “Israel will not withdraw from villages in the Jerusalem area, also not in the framework of the implementation of the third stage of the Wye agreements planned for January 2000, that were signed by Netanyahu.”

He means the Jewish suburbs of Greater Jerusalem, as part of his plan to transfer the Arab neighborhoods to the Authority, but Jerusalem Mayor Ehud Olmert seized the opportunity of the statement and announced plans for a neighborhood in Abu Dis. Arafat calls Clinton in a panic, who calls Barak who says to him: “In in any case we are going to try and achieve a big agreement (those ‘over ninety percent’), so what difference what the Mayor of Jerusalem said?”

Clinton understands Barak’s internal difficulties and takes it upon himself to calm Arafat about Jerusalem; but what about the refugees?

Barak knows that if he wants to reach a final agreement, he must examine how far he can go on the core issues, and in particular the right of return of the refugees from 1948. There are 3.5 million Palestinian refugees in the world, the vast majority living in camps in Jordan, Lebanon and Syria, and Arafat owes each and every one of them a good answer. As someone who was raised in Dayan's shadow and under the influence of Dayan's eulogy for Roi Rothberg who was killed in the fields of Nahal Oz, Barak recalls Dayan saying that "the refugee camp dwellers will never let us sit quietly on land we took from them." Even when he volunteers to disarm this landmine, he must look reality in the eye and see how far he can go on the matter of the right of return. Member of Knesset Yossi Katz, who holds the Palestinian portfolio in the Labor party, says on a visit to the refugee camp in Shuafat that he sides with the "return of 140 thousand refugees to the green line as part of the permanent agreements in the framework of family reunifications, or any other framework." His statement causes an outburst, and Barak repositions: "I made clear to the world leaders that Israel will not accept any refuges to the green line. Talking about returning refugees is equal to a statement that the conflict has not ended."

So he said, but it is clear to him that before entering intensive negotiations with Arafat - of the historic scope of ending the conflict - he must have firm party, coalition and parliamentary foundations for preparing the political community (his loosely-hanging coalition) and public opinion (a society in conflict) toward the great revolution. When he looks around him he sees an arid desert spotted with the remains of his comrades in battle and with scorpions and snakes under every stone. Barak is a great believer in appealing to common sense and people's basic distinction between good and bad, war and peace, real threat and hope - even if they are average people, even if they are politicians, even if they are offended and frustrated politicians. He mainly believes in the shepherds' responsibility for their flocks. He looks around to check the soldiers standing by his side, and knows he's in trouble.

To placate *Shas* he troubles himself and goes to Rabbi Ovadia, telling him about the prospect of peace and the importance of *Shas*. Ovadia tells Barak about the meeting with Blair and the donators that he blessed and was blessed by on his way to funneling funds into "*El HaMaayan*" through a Sarid bypass pipeline.

Things seem problematic also in the Arab wing. During those same days a demonstration of Arab members of Knesset and heads of Arab municipalities and local authorities took place outside his office. On the same day the committee of [municipal] directors general convenes in order to discuss the budgetary disintegration of the localities in the Arab sector. Barak is told: "Perhaps you should go outside and talk to them." Barak says "Okay," but it doesn't happen. Approximately two thousand people are participating in the demonstration. Mounted police and Border Guard forces that get there before them do nothing for calming things. The microphones pick up the shouts of the Border Guard policemen, "Give it to them!" and the responses, "Death to the Jews!" Barak does not intervene. He is convinced that the Arab's support of the political process is guaranteed. He'll solve the rest after the great calm.

Barak has for years cautioned that because "of our control over another nation, we are moving closer toward a definite outburst."

It is during this time that Brigadier General Gilad places on his table the Intelligence Branch's assessment that the outburst is drawing close.

Barak accelerates the political process.

"Aren't you afraid of a violent outburst?" He is asked in the wake of Gilad's forecast.

"I am not afraid of anything," Barak says with the same haughtiness retained from his days in the Special Forces.

"Why do you insist on a permanent settlement?"

"Striving toward a permanent settlement is the only alternative to many new graves, and that is the one thing that frightens me."

Behind the scenes of the public discourse he reports on future troubles: the Palestinian representatives are talking generally, but incessantly, about the refugee problem and moral responsibility. Arafat is not preparing his people to bid farewell to the dream of return to Haifa and Jaffa. Arafat instructs his people to say that Israel will participate in the financial effort to solve the problem, but will not acknowledge the legal responsibility.

In terms of party politics, he is still in trouble. It is true that he has a majority in the party's central committee (*merkaz*), but even he, despite his unique selective hearing, can hear the growls of disappointment rising from the hallways. Following the reports on poverty and hunger, Ra'anan Cohen asks to bring up the social issue as a reason for convening the central committee before the vote on the budget. This is an unmistakable invitation for the defamation of the Prime Minister's character.

On the budget too, he is in trouble. He must impose fines everywhere if he wishes to have industrial peace toward the political moves, but at the same time he wants the monetary supervision of the Governor and to maintain the stability of the currency. There is none like the first two years of a term in office for tightening belts, but the cost is causing harm to the weaker populations and the middle class. Even Eli Goldschmidt, his person in the Finance Committee, spoke out against him. Barak estimates that Shochat will quarrel a bit with the Governor, but at the end of the day he'll accept the consideration that it's the political move that's important and he'll suck up financial stability and protection of the big money at the expense of social maintenance.

Uzi Baram, rejected by Barak and a ticking political bomb, writes a letter to the central committee's members in which he attacks Barak's budget proposal: "save the government from itself", is how Baram concluded the letter to the members. Avrum Burg, who whets his carving knife with alternating dosages of restraint and fervor, knows to tell that "Bayga will be replaced by Sharon within six months". Among the ranks of "friends" a grievance against Barak is growing. It's not only jobs. It's not only problematic financial policy. It is also the camaraderie of winners. In the internal dynamics there is an expectation that the victorious leader award his soldiers a few moments of grace - a gesture of camaraderie in the glory of victory and rule.

But Barak is completely detached from this. He is on a race against time to save the State of Israel. Literally. That's how he sees things.

Not only the party members are wounded and offended. Yitzhak Levy, in addition to the ideological battle between them, has been waiting for a personal meeting for a month and a half. It is true that in the end the real interest wins, but every end has a faint scent of a beginning and what Barak spreads at the beginning is not myrrh and frankincense. The only ministers Barak sees, Burg says, are the Minister of Defense and Bondi.

"I'm dying to meet with people," he says, "but I've taken upon myself a historic assignment and it entails endless engagements."

"People are complaining," he's told. "Barak thinks he's a genius and that we're all idiots," gripes Labor Party member Mr. Anonymous, toward the central committee convention. "It's in people's nature to complain," Barak responds philosophically, with a hint of keeping score with the party politicos who made Rabin's life a misery. "It is a long-time tradition," he adds for the benefit of those who are not familiar with the history of the relationship between prime minister and the party politico.

At the end of the day, Barak accedes and agrees to go to the central committee. He schedules a party faction meeting prior to the meeting of the central committee to calm the expected waves of anger, but he is too late. He's already lost the faction as a permanent source of power. What is left now is the mutual dependence between them and him. As much as Rabin despised the party, he came regularly, like a loyal soldier, to the faction meetings. People would stand up in his honor, and he would respond with a dry report delivered at eye-level. Barak doesn't come to every meeting. When he does come, he's late. Even when he's already seated, he leaves. When he leaves he gets pulled in by the troubles of the negotiations and the day-to-day threats: for example - a report on his desk repeatedly reminding him of the fragile reality in which he works: a policeman who was retired early from the Police Force was caught planning a mass terrorist attack on the Temple Mount; though the judge had said he belongs in a hospital and not in detention, it doesn't reduce the extent of the awful threat inherent in the situation. The Intelligence Branch's assessments regarding Arafat's preparations for a crisis if the negotiations do not bear fruit also unsettle him. The way out according to Barak is to try and preempt the Palestinian blow with a Syrian remedy.

A Whiff of Withdrawal

"As far as I'm concerned," Barak says, "there is a basic asymmetry between the Syrians and the Palestinians, especially because of the military aspect, as they're a much greater military threat than the Palestinians. Removing Syria from the circle of violence, in an agreement similar to those with Egypt or Jordan, changes Israel's strategic situation and leaves very little freedom of action to the Palestinians; even though it is likely that there would be a clause in the agreement with the Syrians in

which they demand reaching an agreement with the Palestinians. On the other hand, an agreement with the Palestinians would not change in the least bit the freedom of action of the Syrians. An agreement with the Syrians, with all its difficulties, is easier to achieve conceptually and in practice than an agreement with the Palestinians. And in addition, Lebanon, which will be easier to withdraw from if there's an agreement. During Clinton's remaining 18 months I need a recalibration of the implementation of Wye, an addition of a framework agreement before implementing the third phase and an intensive effort to examine whether an agreement with Syria is possible. I am aware of the need to be careful lest the Palestinians fear a trick and they mustn't think they are being pushed into a corner. This is why it needed to be managed fairly and discreetly."

One of the players in the discreet route Barak is talking about is the British Lord Michael Levy, who comes to Barak's bureau before going to meet Assad. Barak speaks with him openly about the problematics of withdrawing from the Golan. When Levy returns to London after the visit to Damascus he reports to Barak that Assad responded optimistically. As proof, he is willing to leave an observation point on Mt. Hermon. Albright is also on her way to the region, following American prep work. The current mediator, ready at a moment's notice, is Miguel Moratinos, European Union Secretary. Barak briefs him on everything related to the Israeli position, and Moratinos comes to Assad with maps that can help him understand the Syrian position. He also has in his possession a "basic" Israeli position paper.

Barak assesses that combined European-American pressure and Israeli preparedness are supposed to amount to something and it seems as if there is a real shift in the Syrian position. perhaps it is Assad's health; perhaps the inheritance wars and the need to leave his son, Bashar, with a clean desk - either way Barak notes a significant retreat in Assad's position, who according to Moratinos, agrees to the dispatch of an international observation force as a buffer for a "certain period of time", left undefined. From here on in he prepares himself for a work meeting with Assad or with anyone on his behalf. His center-forward for softening Assad is Clinton. The American President holds the key to Syria's entrance to the circle of legitimate countries, including a generous grant.

* * *

In November 1999 Barak arrives in New York and repays Hilary and Bill for the warm reception at Blair House. He sits with Clinton to discuss dealing with Assad.

At the conference he says to the New Yorker audience: "As Prime Minister of Israel I wish for myself and my successors, true friends such as Hilary and Bill in the White House."

Unfortunately for him, and despite the fact that the conference was supposed to be a closed event, NBC correspondent Andrea Mitchell was sitting in the audience. After some inquiry it turns out she was invited by "entities" who assumed the conference would give her some meat for the piece she was preparing about Hilary

Clinton's use of the American taxpayers' money when running her campaign from inside the White House.

The next day emotions ran high: the head of a foreign state interferes in the internal affairs of the hosting country and the First Lady is embezzling the trust of the taxpayer. Netanyahu and Sharon are also in New York at that same time. They are both fundraising for their internal election campaigns, and the people they're meeting with are not the people Barak is meeting with. Barak ignores the discussions of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, which is a right-wing forum, and prefers a fundraising event (not for himself) of the Israel Policy Forum, an organization affiliated with the center, and left of center. The money raised by the forum will support Barak's positions, but unlike in the times of Netanyahu and Sharon, the money does not get to him directly.

Americanologists tell him: "Don't neglect the American Jewry, and go to synagogues. All Prime Ministers have gone to synagogues." Barak says: "What are you talking about - synagogues?"

The matter-of-factness that Barak communicates caused Chairman of the Conference of Presidents, Ron Lauder, to steer clear of him and the Executive Vice Chairman Malcolm Hoenlein boycotted Barak's main event. Barak isn't fraught. He is here for pushing forward the negotiations with Syria and not for "push and shove" with Netanyahu and Sharon for the charity of American Jews.

In a conversation with Clinton he apprises the President of his plans to withdraw from South Lebanon, as an introduction to the negotiations with Syria, and prays that the days falling away from Assad's life expectancy and Clinton's presidency will be in sync with the timetable of the political process. Clinton says he has a Saudi promise to fund military and economic projects for Syria, and Albright will come to Jerusalem immediately after her visit to Damascus.

Barak returns to Israel and instructs Mofaz, in a Dayan-like ministerial directive, to update the plan for unilateral withdrawal from South Lebanon. The Chief of Staff doesn't like this idea. As far as he's concerned this means he isn't successful at ensuring security at a reasonable price. Mofaz thinks that a unilateral withdrawal is bad for the army's self-confidence and communicates a message of weakness. He does not hesitate to publicly state that "withdrawing from the security zone is a great risk". Barak understands the Chief of Staff's personal distress and discreetly reminds him with offhand mastery who's the boss.

Barak's greatest expertise is wiping out people by looking them straight in the eye while twisting the knife to the exact point where he is convinced that the other side has understood the material. There is no impassioned drive and it isn't clear if he is aware of what is happening on the other side. However, Barak is not a block of wood. The black holes of his interpersonal communications, in which Pole-sized icebergs float about, are not due to bad temperament or inherent evil, but a result of a unique inner division of attention. It isn't clear if Mofaz has delved into this division, but he understood the message and particularly its tone and publicly stated: "If the government decides, we will not object the withdrawal."

Mysterious are the ways of that non-resistance. When the date draws near and it becomes apparent that Barak indeed intends to withdraw in July 2000, Mofaz opposes, though not in direct confrontation.

Haim Barbivai, Mayor of Kiryat Shmona and a Likud supporter, declared that "the government did not consider the severe repercussions of the withdrawal on us, the residents of Kiryat Shmona, and these are financial, security related and social…it isn't clear to us how we will be protected and how the government intends to prevent a mass exodus of residents. It is clear to us that if the forces do withdraw, there will be a mass desertion of residents from Kiryat Shmona and it should be clear, we here oppose the withdrawal of the IDF from South Lebanon."

The entire North begins to simmer. The secretary of the moshav Margaliot, Eitan Davidi, sends an angry letter to the Northern Command in which he wonders what will be if the government withdraws from the security zone. A letter from the Northern Command sent to Margaliot's secretary, about which the Chief of Staff is aware, states that: "The 'Hiram Formation' considers Margaliot as the most targeted settlement after Kiryat Shmona in terms of Katyusha rockets." The letter leaks and it doesn't contribute to calm spirits. In the northern settlements a strike protesting the intention to withdraw from South Lebanon is being organized. The GOC Northern Command Gabi Ashkenazi sits with representatives of the strikers, hears about their objection to the withdrawal and explains to them how the IDF intends to insure their safety. Ashkenazi reports about the "Tower and Stockade" program, according to which a protective wall will be built around the settlements.

"What is this?" those participating in the meeting fume, "Are we reverting to the 'tower and stockade' period?"

After the meeting Davidi says: "We understood from the meeting that there is an IDF plan to bring soldiers into the settlement to protect us and I warn you: there will be a forceful battle. No IDF soldier will enter Margaliot. Who in Tel Aviv would let his kids live with soldiers patrolling in jeeps?"

The next day "intelligence sources" leak that the Hezbollah will continue to attack along the border even after the withdrawal.

Barak peeks at the texts and doesn't respond.

"Do something," his bureau tells him, "if you don't deal with Mofaz personally, at least calm the residents. Funnel funds. Something."

Barak does not authorize any change in plans, not even building an alternative infrastructure on the northern border. He wants a complete surprise, which is essential for withdrawal without injury. No one ever died from words. Failed operational programs carried out negligently, dig graves. In any case, the move in Lebanon aims in the direction of an agreement with Syria, with the Americans making an effort to bring the Saudis onboard for the benefit of the Syrian process and the Egyptians for the benefit of the process with Arafat. At the same time Barak signals to Arafat, declaring that "in the next three months no plans for building in the territories will be issued."

The Minister of Housing Yitzhak Levy ignores: "As far as I'm concerned," he says, "it's business as usual."

What about *Shas*? Barak assumes that toward the meeting with Al-Sharaa he will have the support of 17 out of 24 ministers. He needs a massive majority, as he can't come to negotiations when half of the government opposes the very idea of the negotiations. The problems: the Golan settlers; the opposition in the Knesset and the media; the IDF and the Intelligence Branch and mainly *Shas* - not its political positions, but its financial situation. The signs about the situation with *Shas* being problematic come from Rabbi Ovadia who says in his weekly sermon: "In one day those evil came in…among them perhaps also Yossi Sarid…and Matityahu Ben Hanan saw that man and slaughtered them."

Sharon and Barak invite the Rabbi for a tour of the Golan Heights, and Rabbi Ovadia responds to Barak's initiative: "The fruit of haste - is regret."

What happened? Apparently, Sarid hadn't unfrozen the funds at the rate *Shas* wanted, because the way *Shas* transfers the fuds is not in sync with the agreed upon supervision.

Barak takes it in during the government meeting, throughout the presentation of the continuation of the talks with Syria. Eli Yishay and Shlomo Benizri are urging him to find out if he made a secret commitment that led to the renewal of the talks.

Barak says: "Never."

Yishay says to him: "Everyone says we've lost the Golan, so what did you promise?"

Barak lost his patience.

"I'm telling you for the fourth time that we promised nothing. There was no commitment. Understand this once and for all: the mechanics of the process are that nothing is agreed until everything is agreed…there will not be any discussions of essence. Its ceremonies and introductory meetings and only after these will we embark on a round of real talks."

The Intelligence Branch papers on his desk do not bode well, and Barak presumes it will leak to the press:

"A full withdrawal from the Golan Heights in the framework of a peace agreement with Syria will make it difficult for Arafat to make territorial compromises in the negotiations with Israel and it might harden his position and the Palestinian demands on the topic of Jerusalem."

The IDF and the Intelligence Branch approach the media and explain, as senior intelligence sources, that when "everybody gets everything, Arafat has no reason not to demand Jerusalem."

When Barak responds to these assessments, as part of the internal struggle, he needs his own protocol and commentary: "UN decisions 242 and 338 do not apply to the Palestinians. In the case of Syria, Lebanon, Egypt and Jordan there is a recognized border from even before the War of Independence. Between us and the Palestinians there are the June 4 lines which are the 1949 armistice lines. For 19 years the Palestinians had one hundred percent of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, under Arab governments, and there was never a Palestinian state. Therefore, when we come to define a permanent border, it can be close to the 1967 border, but it can't be that they have claims, similar to Jordan, Egypt or Syria.

In the meantime, his office is preparing for the possibility of a successful summit and the need to take advantage of this success quickly. There are discussions toward a referendum, the related legislation, the right date, how to obtain budgets, etc. The political references are being prepared regarding the "Golan Heights Law": in 1981, Menachem Begin said to Moshe Shachal, head of the *Ma'arach* faction, that "the Golan Law will not prevent the returning of territories in the future, when there is someone to talk with." Moshe Arens, chairperson of the Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, said in a Knesset speech: "If there comes a day when there is someone to talk with in Syria, I am certain that application of the law will not prevent negotiations."

Everything seems good, except for what Ophir Pines, chair of the coalition, has said to Barak that if he doesn't end the crisis with *Shas*, he won't have a coalition. Barak asks, utterly serious, what crisis? After all, the funds are being transferred. Pines reminds him that *Shas* is still demanding NIS 220 million for the Ministry of Religious Affairs. The next day a *Yedioth* headlines asserts that "*Shas* threatens with resignation".

Barak doesn't have the time for minutiae. A phone call to Shochat and the crisis is gone for a cost of half a billion shekels. The consolation: one of the items of the Arrangements Law talks about not being allowed to funnel money to new nonprofit associations, unless they have a two-year activity record. As for current nonprofit associations, everything is under control, that is, under investigation. *Shas* objects, but it can be passed, because this is not about live money, but about the ability to extort it in the future.

Yitzhak Levy, Minister of Housing, airs in public his plan to establish 52 new living units in Bnei Yehuda, in the Golan Heights. Levy prepared the authorizations given by his ministry, the Ministry of Housing, so that he'd be able to wave about the initiative at any given moment when Barak enters negotiations with the Syrians. In September, when Barak caught on, he instructed Avi Drexler, the head of the Israel Land Authority, to delay every permit, in fact freezing construction. Levy, who understood but wanted to exhaust the media effect, asked to check why there wasn't an authorization. Drexler told him: "until I get instructions from the Prime Minister's Office, there are no authorizations." Levy immediately leaked.

At the Knesset meeting devoted to Barak's trip for talks with Al-Sharaa, the head of the opposition Sharon speaks and e regurgitates the same claims he made against Netanyahu when the latter sent Lauder: "You did not demand that Israel remain in the Golan. You didn't demand that the Syrian army evacuate Lebanon. You didn't demand the reduction of Syria's military force. You have transformed our soldiers and the northern settlements into hostages in the hands of the Syrians…you gave up the Hermon and Hamat Gader…without the Golan, the IDF forgoes the rigid defense and stop line at the northern border…we must stop this folly, and the sooner the better."

Uri Sagi, who is responsible for the negotiations with the Syrians, meets with Dr. Daoudi, who is close to Assad, and with "junior clerks" as Barak calls them, as well as with Patrick Seale, the journalist close with Assad, who is a mediator of sorts.

Seale comes to where Barak is retreating in the Galilee after meeting with Sagi, and talks with him about the topics in dispute. Barak, as is his habit, explains to Seale the extent of honesty and openness that is supposed to be the basis of the negotiations, and doesn't go into any detail.

"Uri Sagi," he says, "let the rope loose pretty fast, too fast for my liking."

As an aside, when heading the talks with Shihabi as Chief of Staff, Barak himself said: "Militarily, even at times of peace we need a hold on the Golan Heights, but the decision is political."

Barak doesn't deny that statement and he turns to fight over that same "hold" with the Syrians, more-like security arrangements than actual territory. And of course, the introduction to the withdrawal from Lebanon in agreement.

In parallel, Barak assesses that there might be a situation in which he doesn't have an agreement with Syria and he has a commitment to withdraw from Lebanon. Withdrawal is something that requires extended preparation and he demands from the Chief of Staff an organized plan for unilateral withdrawal.

Several days before he travels to meet with Al-Sharaa, the Chief of Staff and those in confidence present the IDF's plan for unilateral withdrawal from the security zone. The disturbing section talks about how the "dismantling of the South Lebanon Army has to be conducted in the confines of the risk to IDF soldiers…" the planning talks about the potential of violent clashes between the IDF and the SLA during the withdrawal and "it is likely that lots of equipment and weapons will remain in the field".

Barak confirms that he's heard and asks that a plan for withdrawal without an agreement be presented to him. When? "I want to see a plan in March," he said.

Another two days to takeoff. Barak wants to know if any unusual event is expected, an outburst that could overshadow the meeting. Ami Ayalon assesses that the focal points next week are the Temple Mount and Hamas Day. At the time, Haim Ramon, Minister of the Interior, authorized opening a small emergency exit where tens of thousands of people pray, and the authorization, expanded by the Waqf, damages the antiquities according to the Israel Antiquities Authority, and the holinesses of Israel, according to the Temple Mount and Land of Israel Faithful Movement - a weird group with explosive potential at times of Jerusalem-related tension. Ayalon reports on the Waqf's excavations at King Solomon's stables and the growing tensions on site. "Extremist Islamic entities," and not only the Temple Mount Faithful, have an interest in raising the flames. The Temple Mount Faithful have appealed to the High Court of Justice to prevent the continuation of the excavations. In parallel, they are planning an operation on site to stop the excavations. On its part, the Waqf announced that the excavations are an internal matter, and the *Shabak*'s assessment is that extreme Islamic entities are looking to kindle the fire toward the summit with the Syrians. *Shabak*'s recommendation to Barak is to have the police warn these entities and to issue "restraining orders for quarrel mongers". Including the Temple Mount Faithful.

The information about activity in the territories talks about the Hamas' intention to carry out a terrorist attack that might fall on the date the talks begin.

Ayalon estimates that there is a pretty good chance of thwarting the plan (a few days later, a *Duvdevan* force took out two seniors on the wanted list, in Hebron, and arrested three who were involved in preparing the attack).

Nadia Cohen, Eli Cohen's widow, asks to meet with Barak and he agrees willingly. Retrieving Eli Cohen's bones to Israel, and the very dealing with the matter, is as if a touching gesture of compromise, and he certainly intends to talk with Al-Sharaa about this. That same day a working paper of the Intelligence Branch is placed on his desk claiming that Assad is not a man of gestures and that there is no point in asking him for Eli Cohen's bones, or the Sultan Yacoub MIA or information about Ron Arad. Every gesture of this kind is linked in his mind to an Israeli concession and Barak does not intend to concede anything before he knows what Assad's final goal is.

As he prepares the media, the Knesset and the government toward his trip (Barak dealt personally with defining the media guidelines), member of Knesset Azmi Bishara, who met that same day with the Syrian Foreign Minister Farouk Al-Sharaa, speaks up and said that the matter is a done deal. That is, the Syrians have American guarantees that Israel will retreat to the June 4 borders. Barak shrugs: "Bishara doesn't know what he's talking about, and Al-Sharaa is using him to gain extra points with the Arabs." To be okay in the public eye, Barak initiates a journalist appeal to Albright who denies this entirely.

On the eve of his trip Barak meets with Benjamin Ben Eliezer, Dalia Itzik, Yossi Beilin and Haim Ramon and talks with them about "the situation". One of them understand where he's leading, but the word "peace" is floating about in the air and it is enough for them to all feel good.

Two hours before takeoff Barak meets with representatives of the Golan settlers. Their voices are raised. He is silent. At last he says to them: "I told you openly, even before the elections, that negotiations will require painful decisions. I don't know if the negotiations will be successful, but if we do achieve an agreement you should know that you are leaving your homes having fulfilled a great historical mission." This meeting is part of a permanent and foretold ritual. Barak lays down the truth and sympathizes with their pain. Sammy Bar-Lev, Mayor of Katzrin, says: "Uproot settlements? Wreak destruction and then say I brought peace?"

Yehuda Harel: "I don't understand what this peace is. I have children and grandchildren and I am determined to stay."

Yehuda Volman: "You are responsible for our children's mental health."

Eli Malka: "We will take this battle throughout the country, and you will lose."

Barak sits and listens silently. The meeting was planned for half an hour and goes on for two. Barak is signaled that he is an hour late and that the entourages at the airport are stamping their feet. Barak ignores and allows the group to let off steam. At the end he stands up decisively, ends the meeting stiffly and leaves for the airport. He is convinced that if he brings a peace treaty to a referendum he will enjoy an overwhelming majority. David Levy who sees the polls wants to be a part of the delegation to Washington D.C. and announces sweeping support of Barak's initiative.

Arik Sharon convenes the Likud's central committee against the withdrawal from the Golan, but participation is thin and lacks 'bite'. "They didn't discuss jobs there," Barak quips, "so what are they going to fight for?"

At the airport the entourage awaits departure according to protocol, and Barak sees the historic dimension of this trip: "I leave on the nation's mission to obtain peace, and I am enthused by the weight of the responsibility." He says and boards the plane, where Amnon Lipkin, Uri Sagi, Danny Yatom and Elyakim Rubenstein are waiting for him. He leaves Levy, who believed he too was joining the talks, at home. In his place he takes Lipkin. This was a personal and political mistake of the kind Barak makes when the political and national come before the political and personal: Lipkin was partner to the previous process, and his participation strengthens the continuity of the Israeli claim for security. Besides, if he'll have to jump in the deep end in the course of the summit, Lipkin will be there to cover for him, while Levy will look to the sides.

These are issues at the heart of public debate in Israel. When Patrick Seale came to him while he was with Nava in the Galilee, he spoke clearly about how Assad would insist on a solution for the western drops of the Jordan River down to the north-eastern banks of the Sea of Galilee. Even though, Seale clarified, his assessment is that Assad will agree to free movement of Israelis around the Sea of Galilee without any procedures for entering Syrian territory. Sagi spoke about this with his contact Daoudi and had a similar impression. Barak does not know how much of this is positions of defiance or seduction for purposes of negotiations, or real, hard positions, and he is not sure that David Levy can withstand this kind of public discussion. Levy's time to shine will come later on in the talks, if and when there'll be a breakthrough. Barak didn't check if Levy thought the same, but he was certain that Levy had the best interest of the negotiations and the state of Israel at heart. He publicly announced his support of the current initiative, and so he'll understand, suck it up and keep quiet - in case the talks are successful - and that's how it was; but the insult remained.

As he is flipping through papers, Barak comes across a translated piece from the "Al-Hayat" newspaper, according to which Al-Sharaa was instructed by Assad not to shake his hand. Secretary of State Albright told him when they met, "Forget about shaking hands with Al-Sharaa."

"Just as long as they treat negotiations seriously," he said to Albright.

Al-Sharaa is considered to be number two, but he won't budge, not even a little, from Assad's instructions, even if he has been managing Syria's foreign affairs for almost twenty years. He is known to be a cynical and irritable type, but knows how to curb his temper.

The matter of shaking hands with the Israelis is an old, regional trauma. General Gamasi, Egyptian Chief of Staff during the Yom Kippur War, ran the separation talks on behalf of Sadat at the 101 kilometer and made sure to state, "I made sure not to shake the hand of General Yariv." In Israel too, every hand shake with Arafat burns with political fire. At the signing of the Oslo Accords, Rabin agreed, just barely, to shake Arafat's hand. He did so after warning Clinton "no

kisses". The act itself seemed as if he was forced. As far as Barak is concerned, the telephone conversation yesterday with Miguel Moratinos, is more indicative and encouraging than the item in "Al-Hayat". Moratinos told him that Al-Sharaa held a five-hour talk with the heads of the ruling party to prepare them for the new reality. This, to Barak, was a real signal, and for him the hand shake was on the sidelines.

50 Billion Worth in Equipment

In preparation for the meeting Danny Yatom flies to Egypt to personally report to President Mubarak on Barak's preparedness for a significant retreat "that would be acceptable to any objective mediator", with a warning: if there isn't a supporting gesture on Assad's part - such as a joint meeting, perhaps even a four-way meeting - it will be impossible to win a referendum in Israel. Yatom returns with a vague answer. Barak has another conversation with Clinton (telling him that Rabin had at the time suggested to Assad to leave the Golan settlements under Syrian sovereignty, and it might be worth giving something like this a shot now).
And so, after a sleepless night of passing the budget and a weekend of brawling, the Prime Minister's entourage lands in Shepherdstown - a town with 1,300 residents and one main street in West Virginia - where the talks with the Syrians will take place.

Barak wanted Camp David. Clinton wanted Camp David. Assad said no. Camp David reminds him of what he perceives to be Egypt and Sadat's submission to Begin and Carter. Let it be Shepherdstown, but with all due respect for the tribal conflicts of the Middle East, the world's attention is tuned on to the Millennium celebrations. Israel and Washington D.C. are mildly euphoric. Sandy Berger, the National Security Advisor, believes that "80% of an agreement has already been achieved", and the senior American source's statement is published alongside Syrian Ambassador to the United States Walid Al-Moallem's leak, as if "the withdrawal for the Golan Heights is a done deal for us".

Barak, as always, is cautious: "These will be difficult negotiations, with ups and downs and crises."

He knows that the euphoria of peace is good for pushing forward the future concessions, but it is not clear where to draw the line between firm management of the negotiations, which might lead to disappointment, and between the euphoria of peace that might cause a placatory mood that will lead the Israeli public to a positive decision. He maintains eye contact with the odds of the referendum, but makes sure to say: "There is no certainty that there will be results. We won't go for an agreement at any cost."

Around him are the team members for normalization: Lebanon, security arrangements, water and borders; and also Elyakim Rubenstein, despite his functioning as the historic, and not class accountant, is the legal advisor that has accompanied negotiations since he was Dayan's legal advisor in the Ministry of Defense, and Barak cannot not take him. Perhaps he too will get a little bit drunk from

the whiff of history's breath and forget - or recall, depending on the outcome of the talks - who appoints Supreme Court judges in Israel.

The head of the team responsible for security arrangements is Major General Shlomo Yanai. Barak wanted Uzi Dayan, but Mofaz objected. Mofaz objects to Dayan anywhere he can. Dayan is marked by Barak as Mofaz's successor, and everyone behaves accordingly. Dayan was the commander of *Sayeret Matkal* (General Staff Reconnaissance Unit). Mofaz's close circles think that Dayan looks at him through the slits of his eyes, when he actually bothers looking his way - in short, Mofaz says to Barak that he's willing to send only professional IDF officers for the purposes of the negotiations, such as Major General Yanai who is the head of the Planning Branch. Mofaz forgets that Dayan was Yanai's predecessor in this position and managed political contacts, but Barak does not engage in battle with him, as his head is in the big battle. Zvi Shtauber and Yoav Biran of the Foreign Ministry also join, as those responsible for normalization; Noah Kinarti for the water; and Moshe Kochanovsky, the legal advisor of the Ministry of Defense is dealing with the legal status of the borders. The coordinator of the teams' work is Major General in the reserves Uri Sagi, the man credited for Assad's "strategic turnabout" regarding peace with Israel. At the last moment Barak includes Amnon Lipkin - a sort of calculated whim. If he wouldn't have done so at the last moment, it is possible that Sagi would have left and David Levy, who wasn't invited, would have accumulated a volume of insult that would have prevented him from functioning as an important bolt in the future mediation efforts of the agreement. Barak knows everything. But forgets anything with a hint of personality problems when he unites forces toward the greatest goal of them all.

At the last moment he includes in the delegation Ronen Hoffman, who had been in Rabin's bureau and in on the confidential Rabin-Christopher-Assad contacts. Hoffman has finished his Ph.D. on the contacts with Syria and his dissertation was "why peace between Israel and Syria is not possible as long as Assad is alive or in power".

Before the trip there was talk in the bureau about perhaps including Eli Yishay, to ease *Shas*' tribulations of being weaned from the Golan and Deri, but Barak immediately rules it out. "There's a limit. Eli is very intelligent, understands political matters, but including him in a delegation without a Foreign Minister and without professional background is impossible." The last transfer to *Shas*, in the amount of 162 million shekel, is supposed to solve the problem of the link between *Shas* members of Knesset and the Golan Heights; a guaranteed addition of 50 million shekels is supposed to suppress their longing for Deri and to commit themselves to standing by his side in the referendum. This money will be returned one way or the other.

For some months now Barak has been dealing with financing the withdrawal from the Golan (Shochat is involved in some of the contacts). He is preparing the American administration, via Clinton, for the fact that the sums in question are enormous. "Three and a half billion". Al-Sharaa and Walid Al-Moallem are talking about money,

and there too it's "billions". The Congress communicates a chill, especially the Republican wing. When it comes to Israel, not only money plays a part, but conception: when Shimon Peres ran the negotiations with the Syrians when he was Prime Minister, he demanded from the Americans a defense treaty with the United States in return.

Barak thinks that a treaty à la Peres "is relevant only after an agreement and not on the way to an agreement. The agreement must be Israel's responsibility as it upgrades its military power so that it can protect itself alone, without needing to activate the treaty. There is here a problematic paradox, because if you discuss in advance the establishment of an agreement with the United States, it weakens Israel's claim to security arrangements and increases the risk that Israel will not be able to protect itself alone and will need to activate the treaty."

Barak makes it clear to Clinton that he concedes the treaty and prefers the money.

In parallel to Shochat, Amos Yaron, director general of the Ministry of Defense, is preparing the shopping basket with which he's coming to Washington D.C., hoping for a breakthrough. Alongside equipping itself with state of the art American technology, there is nothing like a list of equipment to quell the anxiety of army personnel.

This is about softening the IDF and calming mid-level officers. The softening passes through celebrations of technology and advanced armament. The voice heard in the military bases is that anyone who is lacking something to make him feel as if he could deal better in the next war - should stand up. The equipping fever that ran through the IDF came to some 50 billion dollars. Every division and unit in the vicinity lay their demands at the threshold of the Ministry of Defense, but in a rhythmic process the book shrunk to the size of a booklet with a bottom line that read 17 billion dollars: including a submarine, an Apache squadron, an AWACS aircraft, a Tomahawk cruise missile battery, a Hercules squadron, thousands of minutiae and 4,000 field vehicles and confidential intelligence equipment - including improvement of the satellite alert arrangements, up to a candid demand for a ground satellite station. In parallel Barak demanded from Mofaz to hold a discussion about shortening the length of service in the IDF if peace with Syria and the Palestinians transforms from dream and plan to reality. The Planning branch strongly opposed, but Barak demanded preparedness. Early intelligence warning is a crucial factor, but shortening the length of service is something the entire public can understand as the fruit of peace. Also, the strengthening of the shekel and stock market shares rising in response to the expectation for American money, are another factor in building the preparedness to a withdrawal from the Golan. But for Barak, "It's the economy, idiot". Such growth rate has been unseen since Rabin's 1994, the inflation drops, the budget deficit halts, the external debt drops, 60,000 new jobs are created and he lands in Washington D.C. with a feeling that as far as the internal struggle is concerned, he will take the nation with him.

The withdrawal opponents are waiting for him in Washington D.C. with their own Washington and anti-Clinton lobby. Their approach is that peace with Syria is

the edict of a Democratic president who wants to end his term as a world peace-maker, to wipe off the stains of Monica Lewinsky and to promote his wife Hilary's Senate campaign. Barak's willingness to withdraw, explain the anti-withdrawal lobbyists, is because he is repaying Hilary and Clinton for the latter's help in the elections. Washington, Barak knows, may be a reasonable place, but the logic stops where the brawling over image begins. In its unreasonable wings Washington isn't that far from Jerusalem, including the conspiracy madness and the war over image.

At this point the President is functioning, and the truth is that it's more convenient to manage negotiations with the Arabs under a Democratic administration, all the more so as there is no guarantee that Al Gore will win the elections. Though a Prime Minister in Israel must not even utter such a notion, in real politics what isn't said is sometimes more important than what is said: Democrats in the White House are a vital component of the peace process. Barak follows Clinton even on the procedural issues. "The topics we will discuss by order," Barak clarifies to Clinton even before takeoff, "will be the topics cut short in the 1996 negotiations with Yitzhak Rabin. First security arrangements, then normalization and only then borders."

On the matter of the security arrangements, Israel demands demilitarization and thinning of the Syrian army from the border line almost until Damascus, and the Syrians say okay, kilometer for kilometer - a situation that pushes the IDF back to somewhere in the Carmel mountains. Barak is adamant that the demilitarization not be symmetric, because of the level topographical structure from Quneitra to Damascus as opposed to the channel and mountainous terrain from the future border line.

On normalization he insists that in parallel, and perhaps even before everything else, there is a need for symbolic actions that have far reaching security implications: opening embassies in Damascus and Tel Aviv; opening borders; allowing trade and tourism relationships. Barak has no doubt that the moment real people from both sides meet each other, the same metamorphosis that occurred after signing the peace accords with Egypt will occur here too. Before the signing, the Land of Israel Movement people had opposed it, pairing up with the suspicious and the skeptics. All at once, after the signing a wave of joy and recognition washed over the entire public and eliminated the opposition.

On matters related to Lebanon Barak demanded from the Syrians direct negotiations with Lebanon. He knows the Syrians might be deterred, as any negotiation of this kind puts their continued hold there at risk and directly harms their economy. But it is something worth saying - a goat of sorts that you at first bring in to the mix and then take out. The inherent assumption is that if we manage to get to an agreement, then the draught of peace in the region will blow the Syrians away from Lebanon without Israeli involvement. An Intelligence Branch assessment paper sitting on Barak's desk claims that the Syrians do not want to lose their hold on Lebanon, and they will therefore object to this clause. As far as Barak's concerned, this card is better off lying open on the table.

About the water he is adamant; control over the water sources in the Sea of Galilee, the Banias and the Dan springs. The Syrians are demanding joint control, that is, division, and their claim is backed by international law. But until things come to implementation, it'll rain, a desalination plant will be established or water from Turkey will come.

Normalization First

In a rather wintry January, the delegations meet at the "deer farm" - a nature reserve where the reception ceremony and first social meeting are supposed to take place; a meeting that is actually an agreement on the talks' procedure. Before the Clinton-Al-Sharaa-Barak three-way meeting, the President sends Madeleine Albright to smooth out the sharp edges and to talk to the two.

It turns out that despite prior understanding, Al-Sharaa understands that borders are to be talked about immediately, that is, about a return to the June 4 lines. Barak understands that he is supposed to know beforehand what he'll receive in return for "painful compromises", that is - first talk about the security arrangements and normalization and then about borders.

Albright comes and goes all afternoon and can't budge either from their position. Barak tells her ever so nicely that there are slim chances that the Israeli government will begin discussing the issue of borders and "I think I clarified that with the President". At some point the sentence "Albright, my dear," works its way into the conversation, but his firm refusal stands. Likewise Al-Sharaa. Albright returns to Clinton with a double refusal and a threat of an explosion even before the talks have begun. Clinton understands that its internal politics in Israel and Syria, and as always he relies on this endless charm. "I'll finish this at the joint dinner," he says to her and holds a series of phone conversations with the parties.

Barak tells him bluntly: "I am not going to dinner until I know what the agenda is. After all, we agreed on this in advance, before I came."

Clinton says to him: "Ehud, I'll do everything."

The three need a statement of some kind, before the world deduces from the silence and the leaks that everything has exploded even before it has begun. Clinton, as if nanny or tiger trainer, brings them out for a joint photo shoot. Not a word to the media. Clinton, Al-Sharaa and Barak walking on the bridge over one of the Potomac's tributaries, connecting the two parts of the reserve. In front of them, in a security range of a few dozen meters away, a host of photographers and reporters. The joint photograph is the message. The trio is not dealing with negotiation matters. The three are adept in such idle talk and they are usually more pleasant that the talks they have actually convened for. Clinton talks about the Y2K bug; tells about the Civil War battle that took place here and shares how much the sights here remind him of his childhood in Arkansas. Al-Sharaa follows suit and tells about the fig orchard near which he was born. It is his first and most powerful childhood visual memory, unlike his pilot son who was born to an urban landscape. Barak tells that he was born on the

coastal plain and that he loves the surrounding green, “like on a farm”. As always, he dominates the conversation. “Over the course of one day,” he tells the two, “more soldiers were killed here than in all the wars of Israel and Syria. Six thousand,” he adds, “in 1862.”

The three conclude the exposure to the cameras and return to the guesthouse. Al-Sharaa is still unwilling to shake Barak’s hand - not an ideal opening, not what will lead to that chink in the Israeli psychological block - but Barak says, “A hand shake is important, but agreeing on the security range from the water is no less important.”

At dinner, in front of a burning fireplace, they clash over the agenda. Barak insists on his demand: first normalization, security arrangements and water, then borders. Al-Sharaa doesn’t have room to maneuver - because he can’t disobey his president, and it isn’t polite to say to those present: ‘One moment, I’m going to speak with Assad.” Clinton says: ‘Think creatively. After all, we’re going to have to talk about everything eventually.”

Barak proposes a personal conversation with Al-Sharaa, without American mediation. Al-Sharaa refuses. “Okay,” Barak says, “what remains is the initial agreement. First of all normalization and security arrangements and then borders.”

The rumors about the crisis leak out, but as everything is already supposedly ready for negotiation everyone left the “deer farm” together, as planned, to the Clarion Hotel near Shepherdstown. This is a four-floor hotel: the Americans are on the first and fourth floor; the Israelis on the second; and the Syrians on the third. The American team convinced private citizens to hang the banners with the word “peace” out the windows of their homes and stores, helping to set the atmosphere that is supposed to get the hard and savage Mid-Eastern minds into a placatory mood. In opposition, the media was greeted on the town’s main street by *Chabad* followers who came from Brooklyn. They had advertised there in advance, with announcements calling Jews to go to Shepherdstown to protest the withdrawal. They are waving signs and shouting “traitor” through the loudspeaker - referring to Barak of course. He ignores this, as he does, and instructs the teams to prepare for the meetings. In the evening representatives of the Reform Movement come and create a small counter-demonstration opposing the *Chabad* ruckus, publishing a public statement supporting Barak.

So not to stir things up, the Americans ask all the meeting participants to switch off their cellular phones. Those who didn’t understand what was said soon noticed that reception in the area was decisively problematic. But it’s not only the phones that are paralyzed. The entire meeting is stuck because of lack of agreement over the agenda.

“I have all the time in the world,” Barak says, “until the other side understands this is a dialogue and not a directive.”

On the second day to their arrival, Israeli forces begin moving out of Israeli-controlled territories as part of the implementation of the Wye agreements signed by Netanyahu, and IDF bases were transferred to the Palestinian Authority: the Tekoa base in the Judean Desert; the Irit Outpost near Jenin; a base at the Tank Junction; and

2% of a nature reserve in the Bethlehem area were handed over to Arafat silently. No one spoke or made a noise, except for Arafat who refused the land of the nature reserve, claiming that they weren't quality territories. Arafat complained to Clinton, who spoke with Barak, who from the United States instructed not to respond and Arafat seemingly calmed down.

There are still no agreements between Barak and Al-Sharaa. Barak clarifies, in a broken whisper, for those around him: "Talks such as these must operate like a rocket ship launch to the moon. With zero mistakes."

Shimon Batat, a bureau staffer: "You go for 100% success and you check if there are any factors that might do harm. If there's even one factor that risks the mission, you cancel it. Unequivocal. You wait a year. No harm. As long as you eventually get to your target. Nothing other than the defined target exists."

Clinton is at a loss and Barak suggests to him that he ask Al-Sharaa if he has the mandate to close the deal. Perhaps that will thaw him to a procedural tactical compromise. Clinton asks him and returns to Barak: "Al-Sharaa has a mandate."

From here on in it was possible to build a mechanism that would enable each of the parties to emerge victorious, having shown their people at home that they are steadfast in their positions. Clinton says the committees' work can be maneuvered so that everything will be discussed, but at a different pace.

Barak says: "Okay, in any case I'll control the pace," and the teams started with an ice breaker social meeting. As always, it turned out that when you walk away from ideology, politics and procedure - that hunchback people carry almost against their will - and come face to face to talk: it is about humans, and not only representatives of ideology, politics and procedures. The talks began, in work groups all across the front. Barak waited in his room for results on normalization, etc., having given an instruction to dilly-dally the talks about the borders. The clear impression from the groups' reports: there is what to discuss; the atmosphere of the talks is definitely comfortable. The committee on security arrangements is checking the situation of the territory designated for thinning and demilitarization and agrees on a 10:6 ratio in Israel's favor, due to topographic inferiority and it certainly seems like a real negotiation. The same is true for the other committees. Barak is waiting for a breakthrough on the questions of the demilitarization arrangements and the station on Mount Hermon so that he can give a green light on the borders. As time passes, the Syrians are not responding to the demands for normalization and repeatedly say: What's going on? After all, we already agreed to diplomatic ties in Wye.

Barak thinks out loud: "That's it, there's nothing to do here."

Elyakim Rubenstein of all people, tells him there's no rush. The Egyptians at Camp David were also as rigid as the Sphynx.

Barak wants to talk privately with Al-Sharaa, but Al-Sharaa refuses. In the end, there is a chance meeting in the hotel gym. Barak is on the treadmill, invites Al-Sharaa to come look at the apparatus, Al-Sharaa doesn't pick up on the hint, and Barak who is disappointed with the Syrians' closedness says there:

"We'll take another day for politeness, and we'll go home."

Albright, called in because of the standstill, calls for Clinton, who suggest a joint meeting to warm the atmosphere. They go for a tempering cocktail. The Americans ask for non-formal wear. Barak wore a blue blazer, Clinton in a sports jacket and only Al-Sharaa is suited, buttoned-up all the way to his Adam's apple. Later three additional representatives from each side joined and lay on the table several agreements they had already reached. Before the meeting Al-Sharaa said to Albright: "If Barak is serious about the June 4 issue, we will be serious about the other issues."

"Okay," Barak says, "Let's see them. Let's go to this meeting."

It was nice, but other than breaking the ice personally, there was no progress. Clinton asked, and Barak agreed to wait another day. Time is an important factor for examining the other side's determination. If the Syrians' economic situation is indeed difficult, as reported to Barak in the Intelligence Branch and CIA papers - then sooner or later they are supposed to crack, because alongside the signed agreement they are supposed to get American aid.

Clinton tells Barak that in 1994 he met Assad in Geneva and spoke with him about accelerating the peace process. Assad pushed back with "the time isn't ripe", but later on mumbled what Clinton noted as a milestone: "nevertheless, if there is an agreement, I expect to receive your aid and it will be no less than what you gave Egypt."

Now is the time to examine how much Assad is willing to move forward and what the price is. Are the billions he will receive worth his concession on the waterline and the north of the Sea of Galilee. And mainly, it will speed up Al-Sharaa's agreement to take a significant step on normalization. To this very same moment, the third day in Shepherdstown, no movement on normalization issues was noted. Barak is concerned by the Syrian attempt to lock in the demand to draw the border according to the June 4 version without progress on the other issues. He guides Sagi and Kochanovsky not to have any real discussion of borders yet.

On Thursday the Syrians demand to see maps. Barak refuses. Albright runs a shuttle campaign between Barak and Al-Sharaa. The teams wait. Al-Sharaa repeats that if Barak is serious about June 4, we'll be serious about the other topics. She returns to Barak requesting that maps be set down on the table at the next joint meeting, and Barak refuses. He has no intention to budge a millimeter from his demand to "understand precisely that the Syrians are indeed committed to practical peace even if there isn't any written paper". Clinton suggests to Barak and Al-Sharaa that they both deposit with him their final, theoretical positions, presuming that all demands will be met fully. Barak seems calm, but he is preoccupied.

"The difference between the ideal international borderline for Israel and the June 4 lines," he says to Clinton and Albright, "is negligible. It is the distance a child throws a rock. The problem is that I do not identify a real desire for peace on the other side."

The Black Man and the Cabbage

As the talks drew on, the demonstrations on the Israeli streets intensified. Sharansky demanded brining to the Knesset a bill that states that only a supermajority of Israeli citizens can decide on the question of whether to approve the agreement.

In a conversation with Weizman, who was supposed to be a lever in public opinion, Barak learns that the President has decided to resign because of the Saroussi affair. Barak asks him not to resign, but Weizman, who, as discovered in the meantime, has received tens of thousands of dollars of his millionaire friend Saroussi's money, transferred to his bank account even while he was President, sounds angry, incensed, offended and hurt, and mostly, determined to resign before he finds himself in muddy legal waters.

An ominous signal was coming from Mofaz's direction too. Mofaz was publicly demanding what he set out before Barak as the IDF's position prior to leaving for Shepherdstown: If there'll be an agreement, the IDF will demand to disarm the Hezbollah. The demand is baseless, but Mofaz's outlook serves Barak's demand for Syrian clarifications. Overall, he has a problem with Mofaz if he goes for a referendum. It isn't pleasant to fight for an agreement while the Chief of Staff is spreading word that there is danger to Israel in the agreement. But Barak is completely calm: "Mofaz will carry out any order he receives, so that all of this doesn't bother me."

While Barak is running the talks with the Syrians in Shepherdstown, Corporal Aharon Ketzef passed away. Ketzef was a "Golani" combat soldier who was wounded in 1982 during the battle in the Bourj el-Barajneh camp near Beirut. The injury was slight, a bullet in the leg. He arrived at hospital fully conscious and in good spirits, and his mother, Zila Ketzef, who was by his side let out a sigh of relief and said she was relieved because his "period of time as soldier was over". Like the war, the injury got complicated. Ketzef did not wake up after surgery. For two years he lay unconscious while his leg swelled, becoming distended, until in 1985 the doctors amputated it because of the gangrene. Ketzef spent the rest of his life in a coma, and underwent three more amputation surgeries, until he passed away. He was 37 years old.

Barak, like the Israeli public, watched the life and death of Aharon Ketzef, and felt he was committed to the unwritten will of the Golani combat soldier: no to pointless war and no to ongoing sloppy dealings with the situation.

The day after Ketzef passed away Barak observed the transfer of two army bases in Samaria ("Barak" and "Yosef") to the Palestinian Authority, completing another withdrawal of 5% as part of the implementation of Wye. No resistance was noted in the field, but an ominous growl was heard from Rabbi Shapira's home, where a group of rabbis convened against the handing over of parts of the Land of Israel and instructed IDF soldiers to refuse an order commanding them to hand over army bases and territories to the Palestinians.

* * *

Barak is stuck in Shepherdstown - not exactly a bustling urban metropolis full of interest points, nor a typical rustic resort, but rather the middle of nowhere that can unsettle the nerves of even the calmest person, which Barak is not at this time - and his patience is running thin.

"What about serious suggestions regarding normalization?" he demands.

Only after a week, following initial indications of Syrian willingness to discuss issues of normalization and security arrangements (if Israel retreats etc., embassies and border crossings will be established, but that too if and when…), leaving Barak the rope on borders.

The talks are conducted between Uri Sagi and General Ibrahim Omar, former head of Military Intelligence, who speak as Head of Intelligence to Head of Intelligence; and between Youssef Shakkour, former Chief of Staff and Amnon Lipkin - as Chief of Staff to Chief of Staff. Occasionally, Barak joins the talks. Also among those participating in the talks are Walid Al-Moallem with Zvi Shtauber and Yoav Biran, on diplomatic protocol. Barak lives with the feeling that the talks require quick navigation for the purpose of quick decisions. To illustrate what he means, he tells the team members about an aspiring employee in an American supermarket who comes up to the owner of the chain who was visiting and tells him in loud giggles that he has just now, in the middle of the winter, sold a black guy half a cabbage. As he's saying this he turns around and sees that black guy, quite a scary bully staring at him with fiery eyes, standing right beside him. The employee doesn't miss a beat and continues explaining to the owner that "the distinguished gentleman has returned for the other half, and I sold it to him."

Barak did not get thus far because of his comic skills. Everybody looks at him with somewhat reserved respect; so he won't be Dudu Topaz [Israeli comedian], but he continues his story as if nothing had happened: "so the supermarket chain owner was impressed and said to the employee, listen, you're a resourceful guy, and I'm making you a branch manager. The employee asks where? The owner says, in Phoenix. Phoenix? The employee wonders, that's the city in Arizona where half the residents are baseball players and half are prostitutes (Barak says "prostitutes". There are friends who have been waiting for years for him to be so kind as to say the word "fuck"). Yes, says the owner, my wife is from Arizona. What do you know, the employee immediately glowingly responds, what team does she play for?"

Now he gets a few laughs.

Besides agility and sophistication, he wants to see honesty and reciprocation in the negotiations.

"Honesty and reciprocation are crucial in negotiations such as these. I must see if they are willing to also give something, to understand how it will be reflected in the future."

The situation in terms of honesty and reciprocation among the teams seems "encouraging". People are going up and down in the elevators and by the stairs, convening in the various rooms, looking at the papers and making notes. Nothing exciting to tell Nava, or nothing that has diverged from those formulations discussed

ad nauseum, but in the dynamics created there is an element of hidden hope and Barak believed that there was room for cautious optimism and for pushing forward creative ideas.

"I said to Al-Sharaa, after all the basic idea is that there won't be a border with armies on either side. And if so, let's go for a joint project, and thus the idea of a joint park came up, leaving us with a strip."

But talk didn't lead to agreements anchored in the presidential palace in Damascus, and Barak returns to square one: "If we are not strict about the correct steps, we'll end up with cold peace, and I am personally committed on the most basic level to bringing real peace."

Between crisis and hope, Clinton sets a first draft of the talks on the table, as they are perceived by American eyes. The draft did not include an Israeli commitment to withdraw to June 4 lines. The key sentence was: "Syria acknowledges that the June 4 line is not a border…and is therefore willing to cooperate in defining the border", and it was acceptable to the Syrians. This was a key sentence in Barak's willingness to continue negotiations. The document also included, with the Syrians' acknowledgement: "Syria proposes to establish regular peace ties as between neighboring countries", and "Syria is discussing deployment of military forces, including American command, in the Golan".

As the Israeli team is reading Clinton's paper, its details are published in "Al-Hayat" and immediately after in "Haaretz". It says there that Israel will retreat to the June 4 lines. Barak is furious. He understands immediately that "the entire process has taken a heavy blow, possibly irreversible. The entire matter of confidentiality before an agreement has been reached was intended to prevent embarrassment on both sides. Mainly from Assad. According to the leaked American paper, Syria is depicted as having conceded many things in return for future receipt of the Golan, even before negotiations have begun. (It seems that Robert Malley, a member of Clinton's team who supports the 'Palestine First' track, is the one who leaked the paper.) James Rubin, the American team's spokesperson jumps in to assist: "I read the document," he tells the reporters, "but there was nothing in it similar to what was published." David Levy also denies, but the wave of protest in Israel has begun to rise.

Now everyone awaits the Syrian response that comes in writing: "Evacuation of all Israeli soldiers and civilians…disarmament of nuclear weapons. Division of the water…early warning station on the Hermon. Not to be manned by the United States or France, but by a third country plus Syrian officers…there will be inspectors, not soldiers, in the Golan."

As for Israel's demand not to sign a military treaty with Iraq or Iran - a decisive rejection, with a hint of insult. Clauses that had been discussed, such as an American battalion in Lebanon for six months, are gone. As far as Barak is concerned, this is a return to square one. Clinton insists, and there is certainly room to continue discussions. It is decided to go to round two of discussions.

In the meantime the Israeli version is also leaked: "Israel will withdraw its Israeli forces and civilians from the Golan Heights." The foam begins to form on the waves of protest in Israel.

"The Syrians," Barak explains, "remain with their wish to see already now a tangible full withdrawal, and the Americans are cutting corners. We also made a technical mistake. We thought we had two copies, but it turns out that there were 13 copies out there. Go figure who copied for whom and who passed on a copy; you can't know where is got out. Later on it turned out that the material was probably leaked by Robbie Malley, probably to an Israeli who once worked in one of the government ministries, both of whom are incidentally fans of the Palestinian track, and from there it 'slipped' into the hands of Akiva Eldar, "Haaretz" correspondent. The damage," says Barak, "was great, I don't want to suspect anyone. The problem was that this created a breach of trust with the Syrians, but essentially this shouldn't get in the way."

Clinton is pushing to continue, and Barak agrees reluctantly.

"There was an initial warming, but all in all it was pretty icy. We are talking about everything, but we don't want to say which line. 1967 is the basis, but it was never marked on the ground, there is a dispute where the line passes and how to chart it. They claim that I'm withdrawing from Rabin. They claim that Rabin gave more, but Rabin gave a deposit, which is an essential matter; what they want from me is a direct, irrevocable and actual Israeli commitment to Syria. And I, Ehud Barak, am not willing to be in a situation in which you give everything, or commit to giving everything. That would be submission even before negotiations, and in the end, who will be stuck at your side when there's an agreement and under what conditions. What is this? One side dictating what will be to the other side, or a dialogue? If it is an edict, then don't go there. You'll end up shamed and without an agreement. They are aiming for an agreement without an early warning station, and I am not willing. It's true that the opening formulations aren't very far, but when you get to the details, it rises and falls also on the details, and the line is the details."

The leaks from Shepherdstown raised a wave of protest in Israel. 200 youth of the *Bnei HaGolan* ("Sons of the Golan") movement shackle themselves and march from the Prime Minister's residence to the Supreme Court. The weirdest response is an alert Barak receives, via the media, about the intention to blow up the bridges in the Golan.

Despite Yitzhak Levy and Sharansky's demand for a supermajority in a referendum, the Ministerial Committee authorizes a simple majority referendum. Surveys show that at this point 41% are for complete withdrawal in return for peace. This reflects a slight shortfall, as only two weeks earlier, in mid-December, there was 45% support. 49% were for "almost complete" withdrawal in return for peace - 59% in mid-December. In the December survey 35% objected to complete withdrawal in return for peace, and the gap between the supporters and opponents has narrowed to 5%.

Barak is indifferent. The campaign opposing the withdrawal is alive in public consciousness and there is no campaign for peace. The real campaign is among the ministers and members of Knesset who are supposed to carry the torch of the agreement, if there is one. Barak is convinced that if he has an agreement, the dynamics of peace will wash away the resistance in a great surge of water. The buzz

among the withdrawal opposition is not enough to pull in the public to action that will affect the decision. A demonstration scheduled to take place in Tel Aviv is cancelled because of rain. When the issue burns inside of you, people aren't deterred by rain. The collaboration between the Golan Residents Committee and the Yesha Council is fading. The heads of the fight for the Golan do not want to see too many national religious Jews at their demonstrations.

* * *

There still isn't any progress in the talks themselves. Barak doesn't have a paper in his hand based on which he can say that if the Syrian demands are met fully, we have deep demilitarized zones, open borders, real peace and an early warning station on the Hermon. When he sees that the convoy is treading water Barak proposes a tête–à–tête with Al-Sharaa, but Al-Sharaa doesn't have authorization from Damascus. To speak with Barak, yes, but only in the presence of the Americans.

Barak's patience is wearing thin. He sits with David Levy and Amnon Lipkin and says to them: "That's it, we're packing and returning." He updates Clinton who says to him: "You're right, but…" to Clinton's mind the committees are talking and there are "pretty good signs of progress". The American team believes that this is a luggage trick intended to signal to those back home in Zion that "we are fighting hard", and not a real threat of departure. Barak tells Yatom to tell Sandy Berger to "put me to the test". Clinton doesn't take any chances and organizes a meeting to break the ice. Barak acquiesces. "It doesn't matter if you're Barak, Assad or the President of France, it makes no sense to say 'no' to the President of the United States, unless he's working directly against you."

And so, six members from each party, headed by Barak, Al-Sharaa and Clinton, convene for a "nice" social gathering around the fireplace. Barak even spoke with Al-Sharaa in Arabic, telling him that his daughter, Michal, asked him in astonishment if there are real thoughts to leave the Yehudiya stream, but the Syrian is true to Assad's bidding: first June 4 and then all the rest. Barak sticks to his guns. He wants to see that there are negotiations and not edicts, and to understand, even if only in broad strokes, what he gets in return for what he is required to hand over.

The days pass, a week goes by, and on Thursday Clinton too understands that this isn't breaking the ice, it's breaking your head. He calls Barak and Al-Sharaa and places on the table in front of them seven pages summarizing the situation thus far and the way to breach the deadlock.

The paper was prepared by Sandy Berger's National Security Council, even before negotiations began, and the key sentence in it is "the border between Israel and Syria will be on the basis of resolutions 242 and 338", the essence of which is that in return for peace Israel has to withdraw from territories conquered in the Six Day War. It doesn't say according to which formulation Clinton demands implementation - the Arab version that states "from all the territories", or the Israeli version that states "from territories".

After a several-hour-long meeting it is agreed at the end of the evening, for the first time, to present maps on the discussion table. It is agreed that over the weekend the delegation members will study the American document (that Barak is already familiar with) and will attempt to formulate understandings at the beginning of the week - this time on maps. The next day Clinton returns to the White House. Besides the Middle-Eastern squabble he has a world to run, but he leaves Madeleine Albright just in case one of the sides decides to declare, all too independently, war or peace. Thus another weekend passes. Clinton is supposed to return on Sunday for a three-way conversation and try to lead to a breakthrough. In the meantime he hints to Barak: "Talk on the phone with Arafat, he isn't calm and thinks he's being sold here."

Barak doesn't understand the Palestinian nervousness. Only a few days ago 7% were transferred to them as agreed. Arafat is about to receive another 6% in the future. An additional 22 prisoners are about to be released as a gesture of goodwill for *Eid al-Fitr* and he's just permitted Arafat's convey to travel by land from Ramallah to Gaza for the first time.

The reason was stormy weather that prevented Arafat's helicopter from taking off. And so, the Mercedes with the 'Number 1' red license plate travelled on the roads of the Safe Passage escorted by the Chairman's jeeps (the weapons were stored in the Israeli vehicle escorting the convoy). Arafat himself, it was reported, "looked out the window with great curiosity".

As far as Barak is concerned he needs quiet on the Palestinian front that is supposed to make possible continued maintenance of the negotiations with the Syrians, if those run into troubles in the Jordan estuary. In the meantime, you can sing. On Friday evening he joins a sing-along event in the Israeli delegation. Ronen Hoffman, the delegation secretary, plays the accordion. The lead song is the Northern Command Troupe's *Malchut HaHermon* (Kingdom of the Hermon). Each sings according to their own key: nostalgia, separation, parody, current affairs, tragedy, euphoria. Barak doesn't give out marks, despite his gift of quite rare musical hearing. In his mind's eye he sees his red line and can't see how Assad gets there without a decent shove from Clinton, Mubarak and Abdallah.

That night he speaks with all three. He recommends to them that they hint to Assad that if he doesn't loosen Al-Sharaa's leash, he's wasting everybody's time. The next day he faced a stubborn Syrian demand to received territorial hold in the Sea of Galilee, even without the right to use the water. There is still no indication from the other committees that the Syrians are prepared for a series of actions that will prove their intention is peace. Embassies? In the future. Open borders? Depends on the situation. Free trade zone? Interesting.

"It may certainly be," Barak reflects in retrospect, "that somehow, perhaps in Uri Sagi's early contacts, the Syrians understood that they will have access to the Sea of Galilee, providing that there will be international patronage of the village that is supposed to be established in the area. Their impression is that we've already agreed to this. When we came to Washington and demanded demilitarization, security arrangements and transparency of security deployments, they thought this would

follow, and there is no reciprocity between the chances we are taking and they are taking."

Before the formal talks Sagi sat with Dr. Daoudi, not the most senior in Assad's entourage, and other members, not of the first line. As a person of goodwill, Sagi went one step forward in a manner that led the Syrians to expect that they would hear similar things from Barak. Barak says directly: "It is certainly true that Al-Sharaa did not hear from me what he wanted to hear. I demanded guarantees and their signing a treaty that includes normalization."

In the committees they're talking about opening embassies.

"Suppose they open embassies," says Barak, "who will guarantee that the citizens will receive entrance visas if it's not part of the agreement? But it all depends on the 'situation' according to the Syrians." Barak demands normalization, which means open borders and free passage of goods and people.

The Syrians say explicitly: "Syria does not intend to force its citizens to uphold normalization with Israel against their wishes and feelings," but everybody understands that behind the demagogy is the key question: will Barak utter the words June 4 or will Assad instruct his people to enter negotiations over the disputed site in the northern end of the Sea of Galilee?

It seems that both leaders underestimated each other's stubbornness. As always, it was the Americans who that clarified for the Syrians what this was about: when the Israelis talk about territory, they mean that in return for a several-hundred-meter-wide and 12km-long strip at the north-east of the Sea of Galilee, the Syrians will receive Al-Hamah and its descending slopes. The Syrians want a symbol. To show their public that just as they could reach the Sea of Galilee before '67, with a symbolic number of fishermen with the possibility of passage through a coastal strip under Israeli sovereignty, they will be able to do so in the future. This is why they are insisting now that Syrian sovereignty be up to the waterline. Even if they acknowledge that the water belongs to Israel.

In the meantime the second round of talks is taking place. The Syrians have indicated in the meeting of the security arrangements committee that there is what to talk about with regard to the Hermon: will those manning the early warning station be civilians who hold an American passport?

Barak pushes back: "What is this? Who are they deceiving?" But if they're willing to discuss this, there's a chance of softening them later on, however the continued argument about security arrangements, the depth of demilitarization and Syrian preparedness for normalization led the talks into a dead end.

"What do you want?" The Syrians ask, "Already in '96 we agreed to diplomatic relations with Israel, including opening phone lines and trade and tourism agreements."

The familiar stench of a dead-end is smelt by all. Barak hints to Clinton and, via a messenger, to the Syrians too, that the way Sadat broke down the psychological barrier was by visiting the Knesset in person. And the way King Hussein did so was via intimate talks with Israeli leaders and a visit in Israel itself before actually signing the agreement. "If Assad could find a way to act as Sadat or Hussein did, or to find his

own private method for something of similar spirit, the psychological change would be dramatic. We would shorten the route to a breakthrough and documents."

Al-Sharaa does not respond.

Everyone exchanges whispers with each other, but everybody believes no one. On the Israeli side, which is conducting talks among itself, there is concern about American eavesdropping for purposes of learning the points on which Israel can be pressed and to promote the Syrian position.

Barak is insistent in his objection to a public statement regarding June 4 lines. He is willing to repeat Rabin's deposit formulation, and even to refine it, but to pass it, like Rabin, only to Clinton.

Al-Sharaa attacks and says in a joint conversation with Barak and Clinton: "We have a letter from Ron Lauder that corroborates Netanyahu's preparedness to withdraw to these lines."

Barak does not respond.

He knows it's true. Everyone around the table knows it's true, after all Barak himself instructed Lauder to update Clinton on all the details. Both to gain U.S. assistance in the future and because this is an instrument for when there is an agreement and Barak will have to face the right wing in Israel. In the meantime he doesn't have a trace of anything with which he can return and present an accomplishment. Let's suppose he acknowledges the June 4 borders, but at the same time he is adamant that the road east to the Sea of Galilee and the recreation facilities between Ein Gev and "Arik Bridge" remain in Israel's hands. If he doesn't have a clear principled response from the Syrians regarding security arrangements, demilitarization, opening borders and normalization, he will not declare his willingness to recognize June 4 as the basis.

"If the negotiations fall apart, I don't want to be in a situation in which, to their mind, Israel has committed politically to accept June 4," says Barak.

Barak's problem is not the border. Neither is it the declaration. It is the correlation between the declarations and reality. Al-Sharaa isn't capable of saying that to Clinton, and his people aren't saying anything clear to the Israeli teams. They say that as far as they're concerned, the borderline should pass one to one-and-a-half kilometers to the west of the line of their posts, including Syrian control of the north of the Sea of Galilee, west to the Jordan, Beit HaBek and a territory that was under their control as a result of forceful seizure. Uri Sagi has heard that claim before, but in his earlier talks he said he didn't want to address this as it is a matter for the negotiations.

On Monday the second round of talks is concluded. Barak decides to return to Israel and wait for the teams' summaries. He calls Abdallah, Mubarak, Arafat, Eli Yishay, Natan Sharansky and Yitzhak Levy.

He gets hold of Sharansky as he is on his way to the right wing's demonstration against the withdrawal which they believe is becoming evident in Shepherdstown. The continuation of the talks and Syrian stubbornness have fed the wave of protest against the withdrawal and the journey against the descent from the Golan has exacerbated in the public. 150 thousand protestors filled Rabin Square.

This was an apolitical demonstration, but Sharansky, who together with Lieberman recruited dozens of busloads of immigrants, sat on the stage. The demonstration was a real show of force.

A young guy with a red flag and a picture of Che Guevara caught the eye - Gilad Natan, a member of the *Meretz* Council who lives in the Golan, holding a sign that reads "I am a leftist with the Golan" [In Hebrew this rhymes]. According to current surveys at the time, 25% of *Meretz* supporters oppose the descent from the Golan. "Religious Zionist Rabbis" again published the halakhic ruling against the withdrawal from the Golan, and senior IDF officers who visited Margaliot, the belligerent moshav on the northern border, told the residents that after the agreement it will be very difficult to secure them. Later on 94 families demanded to be vacated and receive compensation.

David Levy, who had seen the pre-Shepherdstown surveys, looks around and smells the unpleasant odor emanating from the intersection of the failure of the talks and the wave of objection in Israel. Levy's political environment does not like agreements in which you give something like sacred land and receive something vague like peace. Levy walks into Barak's room with a clouded expression and says to him that he's not at all certain that the agreement will pass in a referendum. The two agree that Levy will return to Israel, stop on the way in Morocco and talk with the King to hear from him how to crack the Syrian and Palestinian nuts.

Albright is running between the parties with messy paperwork with her handwritten notes scribbled on it. Clinton skips between the White House and the Clarion Hotel. Everyone is sweaty and breathing heavily, except for Barak who exudes complacency and serenity. The American team brings UN General Secretary Kofi Annan into the picture. He calls Barak and proposes a meeting. Barak refuses. He doesn't need more pressure, but rather a real gesture that will prove he has a partner. Al-Sharaa is waiting for a public statement by Barak. Clinton presents the parties with his paper - again, the same seven pages that summarize the understandings reached thus far, and an outline for the future.

As far as Barak is concerned this is when to let time and Clinton do what they will do. In a last conversation with Clinton he says that without a Syrian gesture there is no point in carrying on. Something. "A summit between me and Assad. Opening the border to Israeli journalists."

Barak's problem is Israeli; when he says "no" to the Syrians - to take a time out and run a forceful and diplomatic campaign against them and thus pass to the next round reinforced - the response in Israel is as if this is a failure. The opposition celebrates as if it is a conclusive failure. In the fog of the political and ideological war the Israeli public is in the throes of, there is fear that the majority will buy into that argument. And yet Barak takes the chance and agrees upon the continuation in a week's time and returns to Israel.

"There are significant cracks in the Syrian position," he tells the Israelis.

Arik Sharon responds immediately: "Barak says he's discovered cracks, but the truth is that the Syrians identify wide, almost to the point of collapse, breaches in the Israeli defensive shield."

Barak reiterates and clarifies: “It’s true that we can identify some cracks in the Syrian stubbornness, but the talks are being conducted in a manner in which nothing is agreed upon until everything is agreed upon. The road ahead is still long and difficult.”

Barak in a Kaffiyah

Barak hasn’t a clue if Assad will come around, or if *Shas* will join the preliminary reading of the Likud’s bill for requiring a supermajority in the referendum about returning territory. During the talks in the United States the Likud brought the bill to a majority of 61 members of Knesset and *Shas* supported. Barak is furious, engulfed in the cold blue flame typical of him when things don’t play out according to his rules. He then regains composure. If he reaches an understanding with Yishay and Rabbi Ovadia that they abstain, the bill won't pass. The question is how much will it cost, and will the Rabbi be able to deal with the national-religious wave that is gaining power from the ultra-orthodox and the religious-Sephardi wave joining from below.

Yehuda Harel goes to see Rabbi Ovadia. He has ‘moves’ in national-religious, ultra-orthodox and Sephardi-ultraorthodox politics. Harel has an ongoing dialogue with Rabbi Ovadia. Despite his seemingly *schlemiel* appearance, he knows how to sneak in a hint of a threat alongside talk about the relationship between the Torah of Israel, the people of Israel and the Land of Israel, including the Golan.

Barak needs a counter attack. On the day he arrives from Washington he escorts Minister Yishay to the Bar-Mitzvah celebrations of the son of the minister and rabbi, Benizri. Between pastries and speeches he tries to figure out *Shas*’ position in the stormy past days. The next day he checks the feedbacks in Israel. The surveys about the general mood regarding continuing the talks and an agreement are still not picking up. Eppie Ya’ar, one of the pollsters, reports that there isn’t a Jewish majority for the withdrawal. It’s worse than that; a survey among *Shas* voters reveals that most of them oppose withdrawal from the Golan. Even more worrying is the assertion that Rabbi Ovadia’s ruling, even if he can obtain such, will not influence his voters. Barak reviews the surveys himself, but doesn’t ascribe importance to them in terms of leadership and history. “I told Rabin that the main problem is not the people, but us. If there is an agreement that isn’t worthy in our eyes, in terms of security or otherwise, then we won't bring it. If there is a peace agreement we believe has what it takes to protect Israel’s security and future, we will have the internal power and moral authority to convince the people of it.” Despite this, Barak sends Fuad to talk to the Rabbi and to check how determined he will be about conveying a firm message. Fuad returns optimistic, but Fuad is always optimistic, and the Rabbi’s decisive voice has not been heard.

As always, *Shas* has its own agenda. For example, the issue with the “*Dor Shalom*” [Peace Generation] movement. *Shas* views the movement as one of Barak’s creation, with its heads joining forces with Yossi Sarid for the purposes of establishing an independent secular education network. Their intention is to establish

already in the first stage dozens of kindergartens, and Sarid declares his intention to subsidize them just as the *Shas* kindergartens are subsidized. A first kindergarten is already operating in Petach Tikva, and as far as *Shas* is concerned this is a cry for the souls of the children of Israel. Especially when these are children from a Sephardic and traditional background. Apart from which, *Shas* is submitting a bill according to which "public budget support should be revoked from theaters, shows and movies that preach against the core values of the state or nation and offend the feelings of the public or portions of it." Sometimes it's hard to tell if this is a comic break, a threat to the cultural existence of the Jewish people or a political tool for extorting another helping of funds.

In moshav Margaliot, the Likud's center against the withdrawal from the Golan, activity is stepped up and it is decided to send their IDs to the Prime Minister's Office. *Chabad* holds a gathering against the withdrawal. Former Chief Rabbi, Mordechai Eliyahu, says there: "This is a dark time for Jews…we must make a tear, because the government wants to return territory, and it isn't possible that we concede the Golan…Syria needs to return Damascus that was taken from Israel in the time of King David." The gathering is concluded by the Lubavitcher Rabbi's secretary who came from Brooklyn with the statement that "We must fight anyone who hands over territory." The applause shakes the room.

Jerusalem is filled with images of Barak in an Arafat-like *kaffiyah*, titled "Traitor". Barak reports these incidents and his response to them ranges from disregard through dismissal to remarks such as "those guys that dance on the hilltops". This is how he used to respond when he was alerted to the dangers of an operation when he was in the Special Forces. "Arabs?" he used to say when he was told about enhanced security in a target across enemy lines, "Arabs are only a rumor." That is, as far as Barak is concerned, this is how he used to pep his soldiers as they approached the target and could almost feel the guards' breath. "It is us, Israel's warriors, equipped from head to toe; and them, a few sleepy, scared guards." Which he can't say about the battle of the withdrawal's opposition. Amos Kenan, a long-time icon of the left, has signed an advertisement of "Do not withdraw from the Golan" for the benefit of a "tyrant of a faltering country". Barak understands he's in trouble and turns to check the Shepherdstown feedback on the Syrian end.

Responses in Syria are, as always, double-edged and can't be cracked by regular Intelligence analysis, but only by hunch, professional instinct or a gamble. Barak might gamble his life and the lives of his soldiers, but never on the fate of the State. A few days after Shepherdstown, Bashar Assad, heir to the throne, sat with the Syrian General Staff and told the generals "we have reached a decisive phase." Abdallah, King of Jordan, calls Barak and tells him that the messenger he sent to Assad – Abed al-Karim Kabariti, has just returned from a meeting with Assad and the latter asked him "suppose I would agree to sign an agreement with Barak, who can guarantee that the Israeli referendum will ratify it?" Kabariti, Abdallah tells Barak, says you are certain of this, but Assad shook his head and repeated his demand for a clear public statement about June 4." Barak says to him something in the vein of 'it's on me', but he also knows that Assad has already outseen several Israeli prime

ministers who were convinced they were right. One of them was assassinated on the altar of his belief.

Barak says to Abdallah "I will pass the referendum and Assad can decide if he wants peace."

To Patrick Seale Barak says candidly: "If Assad is serious, it is vital that we see a real gesture. He can choose what he's capable of doing, but something that will undermine the lack of trust. If he can't personally, then he should invite a delegation of Israeli academics and journalists for an official visit in Damascus, as a contribution to the thawing."

Seale believes that matters in the Middle East are not run this way. Barak says: "It's about time that things are run in good and open spirits," and returns to his internal front.

On his desk lies a *Mossad* assessment that says there will be peace with Syria, but "complete normalization in our relationships with Arab countries is not to be expected as according to the Arab perspective, peace treaties are armistices."

The head of the *Mossad* Efraim Halevy is cautious as always, but delivers the goods when he states that "there will be peace with Syria". Barak knows Halevy since the latter was head of the *Mossad* branch in Washington D.C. at the beginning of the '80s. He retains Halevy in the position of *Mossad* head despite Netanyahu's promise to Amiram Levin who awaits this appointment. Friends tell him that he not only awaits, but also "expects the promise to be kept". "I asked Bibi and he told me he didn't exactly promise. If he would have said to me I committed – then I would have made good on the government's commitment. Barak is yet undecided. These won't be the goods Shabtai Shavit provided Shamir, both from the hawkish-right wing of the political spectrum. In any event, the relationship between the Prime Minister and the Head of the *Mossad* are not just a matter of personal chemistry and partnership on a political goal, but mainly an ability to translate this relationship into situation assessments and operations that suit their commonalities. Barak does not agree with this situation assessment: in his opinion "it could be that on the margins there is a moral stance, but the main thing is a common higher national interest". Supposedly, Barak and Levin should be attuned regarding that common higher national interest. They both ate from the same mess tin and come from the same village. But when it comes to Levin, we are talking about an independent personality with a tendency for unbridled and somewhat awkward bursts of over independence in the gray areas between inner protocol and external implications.

"What's happening in the *Mossad*?" Barak asks Levin.

"A corrupt business," Levin says directly.

"Amiram is an excellent operations man," Barak says, "but he's less experienced in situation assessments and in any event, it's not at all simple to rock the system in sensitive times such as these."